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When Will the Mute Swan Sing?

On the “Orientalism” and its “False Truth”

QUAND CHANTERA LE CYGNE MUET?

- SUR L’ORIENTALISME ET SES VERITE FAUSES

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Abstract: Edward Said, by surveying closely and decoding the Orientalism from the eighteenth until the mid-twentieth century, makes truth articulate from inside the Orientalist untruth, to echo Marx: the Orient could not represent themselves; they had to be represented by Europe; yet the originally “well-intentioned” Orientalist representation, the discourses of Orientalism turn out to be but of “schematization” of the entire Orient; European culture, by speaking, interpreting the Orient, managed to construct its own domination over other non-White cultures, managed to colonize the East in fine name. What passed for universal truths about European superiority and the other side inferiority yet now prove to be merely culturally specific, historically relative constructions in service of colonialism and imperialism. The Orient was “Orientalized” within systematic economy of Western imagination, invention, one-sidedness, or even untruthfulness, lies.

Key words: “universal truth”; Orientalism; culture; Colonialism; Imperialism

Résumé: Edward Said, en examinant de près et en décodant l'orientalisme à partir du XVIII^e jusqu'au milieu du XX^e siècle, fait énoncer la vérité de l'intérieur du mensonge orientaliste, ce qui se répercute sur Marx : l'Orient ne pouvait pas se représenter, il devait se faire représenter par l'Europe; pourtant la représentation orientaliste *bien-intentionnée*, le discours de l'orientalisme se révèlent d'être un prétexte de la *schématisation* de l'Orient, la culture européenne, en parlant de l'Orient et en l'interprétant, a réussi à construire sa propre domination sur d'autres cultures *non-blanches* et à coloniser l'Est. Ce qui s'est passé pour des vérités universelles sur la supériorité européenne et l'infériorité de l'autre côté prouvent encore aujourd'hui des constructions culturellement spécifiques, historiquement relatives au service du colonialisme et de l'impérialisme. L'Orient était *orientalisé* dans l'économie

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systématique de l'imagination occidentale, de l'invention, de la partialité, voire des mensonges.

Mots-Clés: *vérité universelle*; orientalisme; culture; colonialisme; impérialisme

They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.” Three times Edward W. Said quotes this sentence in his *Orientalism* from Marx’s “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte”. Said surveys the Orientalism from the eighteenth until the mid-twentieth century, probes into how the English, French and American academies constructed, produced discourses (history, philology, literature, anthropology, politics, travel books, etc.) on images, ideas, customs, and so on, of “the Orient”—mainly the Mid-East Arabic world, India, and Egypt; how “they”, the Orientals were “represented”. Said deconstructs and criticizes the ideological patterns structures, production economy, and rhetoric strategies of these discourses. Said achieves the decoding of Orientalism as “insensitive schematization of the entire Orient” (Edward W. Said, 1978, p.68); European culture, by certain “enormously systematic discipline”, got empowered “to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively” throughout the period of post-Enlightenment. The used-to-be-universal-truth Orientalism was but “a British and French cultural enterprise, a [cultural] project”; what passed for universal truths about the Orient yet now proves to be merely culturally specific (and therefore historically relative) constructions, to be an Orientalist canon: “the Orient was created...Orientalized”. (Ibid, pp.3-5)

What “was” the Orient?

The Orientalized Orient falls into trap of “representation” by Other within Orientalism: the relationship between West and East was of “the gazing” and “the being gazed at”; the East was clownized, feminized, made fun of for its boundless “eccentricity”; it becomes “a living tableau of queerness” (Ibid, p.103), and serves as a contrast of Weakness to the powerful White myth. Flaubert’s encounter with the Egyptian courtesan is the typical mode of this unbalanced relation, the “pattern of relative strength”(Ibid, p.6) between East and West. The West speaks of, writes, represents and interprets the East, while it remains mute, without self-representation, nor autonomy. The colonized was henceforth to be “postulated as the inverse or negative image of colonizer” (Leela Gandhi, 1998, p.15) and remains forever the negative: Europe is “powerful and articulate”, the Orient is “defeated and distant”; Europe’s articulation of the Orient is “prerogative...of a genuine creator”. (Edward W. Said, 1978, p.57) Europe had the almighty cultural strength to give his Version of the Orient.

The Orient was set apart as the “separateness”, with its “eccentricity”, “backwardness”, “silent indifference”, “feminine penetrability”, and “supine malleability”. (Ibid, p.206) Among the complex array of ‘Oriental’ ideas of “Oriental despotism, Oriental splendor, cruelty, sensuality” (Ibid, p.4), there’s the single positive “splendor” only to result in the most negative: the West desires to colonize. The Oriental, in the eyes of the West, is “irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, ‘different’”, not “normal” as the European; he is “gullible, ‘devoid of energy and initiative,’ much given to ‘fulsome flattery’, intrigue, cunning, and unkind”; Orientals are “inveterate liars...‘lethargic and suspicious,’ and in everything opposing the clarity, directness, and nobility of the Anglo-Saxon race”. (Ibid, pp.38-40) Well, an Oriental is “first an Oriental, second a human being, and last again an Oriental”. (Ibid, p.102) He is guilty, and “[t]he crime was that the Oriental was an Oriental”; it seems he’s never able to escape from being “contained and represented by dominating framework.” (Ibid, pp.39-40)

1. SUBJECTIVE SUPERIORITY

Why is there the airy European fantasy about the Orient? What right have the Europeans to grant themselves superiority with regard to people whom they name “Oriental”? Why should European societies be “cast as epitome of modernity and progress” (Susan Schech, Jane Haggis, 2000. p.18)? The ranking of the Non-Europeans at lower stages of cultural development was designated by one other

particular culture, how could this be labeled with universality, authenticity? The lower stage of the non-Europeans was not in a “common” evolutionary progression to “civilization” at all, it was in a specific progression towards a specific “civilization”. The secret lies in the truth that European had the Platonic essence, “an essentialist conception”, a “characteristic ethnist typology”, the conception “soon proceed[ing]... towards racism.” (Anwar Abdel Malek, 1963, pp. 107-8) For the naturalist, it was biological determinism: Whites and colonizers were “agents of biological or inherent destiny” with an inherent, ontologically elevated nature, whereas for the progressivist, Europeans were “agents of history”, while the agency of the colonized, the categorized non-whites was undeveloped. (David Theo Goldberg, 2002, p.94) There was originally a large gap between the races, between two continents, and another larger one was “invented” as a *racial belief* in between, which “rest[s] in the narcissistic myths of negritude or white cultural supremacy”. (Homi K. Bhabha, 1994, p.40)

To the Europeans who designate themselves as “subject race”, the Orientals, “‘they’ become ‘they’ accordingly”, (Edward W. Said, 1978, p.54) totally marginalized as Other. The Orient, as an “European invention”, had its differences “absolutized as an Otherness”; (Aijaz Ahmad, 1995, p.80) Orientalism becomes “the inherent fantasy of representations” (Ato Quayson, 2000, p.62) of the Other being colonized. So, “we” becomes “all”, Europe becomes the World; when European academy celebrated sacred concepts of humanity or culture, they were as a matter of fact celebrating values within their own culture. Universalism was Eurocentric in the extreme, of which the truth is of a “unitary and homogeneous human nature which marginalizes and excludes the distinctive characteristics, the difference, of post-colonial societies” (Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, 1995, pp.55-66); the truth is the falsity of the assumption that “European” equals “universal”; therefore, the word “universal” is, “indeed, limited”; the Orientalists were “born into an ethnocentrically sealed world”. (Charles Larson, 1995, p.65)

The concept of universalism goes “hand in hand” with the question of “standards”: the “absolute and priori entities” come into being “whenever a statement is intended to be final and authoritative.” (Flemming Brahms, 1995, p.68) Europe, by authorizing its representation of the world, the universal, put itself high upon the pedestal, and “in effect legitimized inequality” based on certain racial and cultural rule mainly, claiming to be “the privileged agent of universal reason”. (Susan Schech, Jane Haggis, 2000, p.173) The European constructed his subjectivity by fabricating Other’s objectivity of its inferiority, and thus schematically achieved its ambition to be “the salt of the earth, the measure and master of all things”. (Susan Schech, Jane Haggis, 2000, p.173) The White myth positions its attitude towards East: it is not to respect, but to satisfy its curiosity; not to attempt an understanding, but to stay higher; not to accept, but to marginalize it as Otherness forever. Colonialism, then, symbolizes the historical invention through which West works systematically to take for granted cultural divergence, to cancel or negate the cultural difference, ideology, and values of the “non-West”.

2. THE TRUTH OF ORIENTALISM

What is at stake with the “epistemic violence” (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 1988, p.272) is not simply the “epistemological narcissism” (Leela Gandhi, 1998, p.37) of European culture, of course. If postcolonial theory, as illustrated by Leela Gandhi, “principally addresses the needs of the Western academy”, (Ibid, p.ix) then Orientalism principally addresses the needs of the colonialism and imperialism in need of the name of honor. The Orientalists saw the necessity such “agency” be promoted by cultivating in the East “potential for self-determination”, to save natives, the less fortunate, from their “(pre-)historical selves, the effects of their undeveloped or uncivilized conditions”, (David Theo Goldberg, 2002, p.94) Europeans were now on a “civilizing mission”, playing roles as “missionaries, colonial administrators, and imperial legislators”—in no sense colonizers—to bring culture to the undeveloped, rather “primitive” societies, and this mission would eventually bring even the primitive into the light of progress and modernity. Indeed, Orientalism was aimed at the predomination of European culture over all other cultures, to get the European an identity of superiority, to achieve the “leadership, hegemony”, (Edward W. Said, 1978, p.7) subjective sovereignty.

The craftsmanship of Orientalists developed, and a nineteenth-century “colonial painting” comes into sight, the “picturesqueness” of which “effectively silenced the Other”. (Edward W. Said, 1994, p.201) The great achievement of this silence is attributed largely to the imaginative endeavors of Orientalists: the Orient was “reconstructed, re-assembled, crafted...born out of the Orientalists’ efforts”, (Edward W. Said, 1978, p.87) it finally started to take looks of a “real Orient” as expected—“Orientalism overrode the Orient”. (Ibid, p.96) Although it is the common tendency of each culture towards a “complete transformations” of other cultures, towards no unconditional reception of other cultures, Orientalism was better than all others prepared to accept other cultures “not as they are but as, for the benefit of the receiver, they ought to be”. (Ibid, p.67) The great enterprise of European high culture and mode of governance tells the truth of Orientalism as the “corporate institution” for dealing with the Orient by “making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it”. (Ibid, p.3) Orientalism was European domination over the Orient within the guise of a graceful air.

Let’s study the logic of “universalism”: since it happens to be that the colonizers who dominate have just the “universal” features of humanity, it is these people who are “human”, whose civilization is legitimate, consequently, the assumption of universalism turns into an authenticator of colonial power. It is to produce the Orient “as fantasy or figment of the West’s representational imagination in the ultimate service of Western domination”. (Ato Quayson, 2000, p.62) Orientalism becomes synonymous with European domination of the Orient. Orientalism is an economy culturally stylized, mantled, distorted, becoming a cultural make-up, masquerade, and camouflage of colonization. It was “a flag to disguise the tiger”(the Chinese idiom: 扯大旗做虎皮), to shroud invasion, exploitation, colonization and imperialism in decency. Orientalism was developed into certain “consolidated vision” with the object as victim, having no alternatives but to “serve or be destroyed.” (Edward W. Said, 1994, p.204) Or, there could be the argument of such hostility that some societies or cultures are “evolutionary dead ends, best left to ‘die out’.” (Susan Schech, Jane Haggis, 2000, p.18) The “margins”, the “silent, silenced center” (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 1988, p.271) can survive, in silence, or, die in silence.

The identity construction of European universalism is “the cancellation of the logic of incarnation and, as a result, of the universalization of its own particularism”, the other peoples’ being without history, to Orientalists, is the very articulation of “their capacity to represent the universal.” (E Laclau, 1995, p.97) The universality myth is thus a strategic lie for the sake of imperial control; Orientalists became empowered over others, and that power “often went hand in glove with a consciously undertaken imperial enterprise”. (Edward W. Said, 1994, p.56) Orientalism systematically developed representations within a fixed framework, not as originally its cultural essence, but a political one. The beautiful fantasy that the Orient looked forward to “Western attention, reconstruction, even redemption”, and the serious sense of responsibility that Orientals were “problems to be solved or confined or...taken over” (Edward W. Said, 1978, pp.206-7) legitimize the colonizers with the noble glory as redeemer as savior, in addition to the sweet feeling of inherent superiority. Said states, “[t]he modern Orientalist was, in his view, a hero rescuing the Orient from the obscurity, alienation, and strangeness which he himself had properly distinguished”. (Ibid, p.121) The godly role of heroism donned turned colonization into an honorable enterprise.

3. EXPECTATION FULFILLMENT

Orientalism used to be the textual stage on which Orientalists created an Orient in a leisurely style. Why did it achieve success by inventing “universal truths”, by telling lies? Why has there been what Said names a “textual attitude” towards the Orient? It’s, all in all, what he calls “appearance of success” (Ibid, p.93), fulfillment of an *expectation*, a *belief*, held by the European mentality at large. For the sake of colonization and imperialism, both territorial and cultural, at least for the sake of the racial determinism, the White superiority, it was a *must* that a certain “expectation” to be met, the Orient was “Orientalized” and was “discovered to be ‘Oriental’ in all those ways considered commonplace by an average nineteenth-century European”; also, “it *could* be—that is, submitted to being—*made* Oriental.” (Ibid,

pp.5-6) Thus the Egyptian courtesan Flaubert encountered was just “typically” Oriental: “she never spoke of herself...*He* spoke for and represented her” (Ibid, p.6); and the West from now on sees no other models, hears no voice from the Orient—certain expectation, for if it’s “deviation from what were considered the norms of Oriental behavior”, it’s to be “believed to be unnatural” (Ibid, p.39)

So, *even if the mute swan finally sings*, “to speak for, or to sound [its own] muted voices” (Leela Gandhi, 1998, p.2), will there be the audience? Even if there will be, then, will the audience stay for the native Egyptian version of *Aida* (Edward W. Said, 1994, pp.134-57)? For Orientalism used to be “an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western Consciousness”; (Edward W. Said, 1978, p.6) certain expectation can not but be satisfied, yet never violated; the Orient has been all along the stage of confinement to the East; representation is a “theatrical” representation; an Orientalist is only the “particular specialist in knowledge” for which the Europe as audience at large “is responsible, in the way that an audience is historically and culturally responsible for (and responsive to) dramas technically put together by the dramatist.” (Ibid, p.63) Historically an Occidental speaks of Orientals, West gazes at East, White names the coloreds; the West has got accustomed to speaking, the Oriental used to be spoken of, so, as Roland Barthes says, “a myth...can invent itself...ceaselessly”, (Ibid, P.308) can this myth one day be turned up-side-down? If what is seen is out of expectation, a kind of faith now, it will be “as even now you look/but never see me”. (Homi K. Bhabha, 1994. p.47) The sadness of truth is: if it does not exist according to what is believed to be, then its existence *is* non-existence; it is looked at, but never seen; it survives only as persistent constitution as the Western Self’s shadow. Originally when the European learned about the Orient, he learned about the less fortunate, which must have satisfied his self-esteem; later on, this belief gets further consolidated; and, when he had the power to know other cultures, he wanted only aspects of truth; or, he had the “inconvenience” of truth, for knowledge of truth serves as a hindrance to telling lies. Now he loses the colonial power, he loses also the interest in other cultures. He cannot stand his usual expectation not being met, for this could signify that his former sense and position of “a hero” totally collapse.

4. SING? IN WHAT LANGUAGE?

“Who gets known in and as history?” (Leela Gandhi, 1998, p.172) He who controls the discourse economy, he who has power over the language, the “discourse of power” (Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, 1995, pp.55-6) the “power to narrate, or to block other narratives”. (Edward W. Said, 1994, p.xiii) If a society appears “monstrous” to another, what is problematic is always language, for the monstrous image lies in a “symptomatology of the human failure to negotiate the gap between culture and nature”, (John K. Noyes, 2002, p.276) failure to communicate with others, to represent, interpret themselves within the language machine. However, if the historically muted native subject is to break the Oriental perpetual silence, what language should they turn to?

Take China for example. The language Chinese has not the status of communicating with the world, but unfortunately there’s no other language to convey and contain the Chinese culture totally. Even English as language cannot provide “the terms and the structures” by which Chinese people have a Chinese world, (Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, 1995, pp.55-6) by which Chinese reality is constituted; it provides no names by which China may get “known” (Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, 1995, P.283. pp.283-4). That the greatest Chinese literary work *A Dream of Red Mansions* refuses translation lies most in the untranslatable Chinese-stylized ancient images. English cannot give the typical Chinese “system of values” or its “concept of history, of difference” upon which Chinese social, economic, especially cultural discourses are grounded. (Ibid) English cannot embody the Chinese “moral, ethical and aesthetic values”, which lay fatally the basis for Chinese people’s identity, their “sense of particularity” as a member among human races. Yet, culture is carried by language, within language; Chinese as language as culture is the “collective memory bank” of Chinese people’s historic experience. (Ngugi wa Thiong’o, 1995, p.289) All in all, language itself “*is* culture”. (Ketu H. Katrak, 1995, p.257) If Chinese lose Chinese language, they lose the culture.

Examining contemporary Orientalism as a whole, as Said says, we are taught a lesson on the

“intellectual dishonesty of dissembling”, (Edward W. Said, 1978, p.327) Said insists on a survey of Orientalism “as a discourse”, for discourses have the “transformations of rhetorical and discursive tools” (Ketu H. Katrak, 1995, p.257). The Orientalist discourses, as Said believes, tell “the truth of language” in Nietzsche’s sense—it is

...a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are. (Friedrich Nietzsche, 1954, pp.46-7)

Orientalism was nothing but a “well-intentioned” election of the Oriental facts, the “reproduction” of information sifting through, processing, and storage, the “reproduction” stereotyping the Orient. Eventually the gigantic discourse machine was all powerful, sacred, even overwhelming. However, we know that only by taking an honest, respectful and responsible attitude towards one’s own and others’ history and civilization, towards “the existence of...*alter ego*”, can a certain culture get its own maintenance and development. (Edward W. Said, 1978, p.332) The key is, after all, to tell truth. Yet the perpetually silent Orient, “the mute swan”, with all its flying and dancing beauties, will it sing songs out of its own truth one day finally?

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